Education Design Lab

September 2025

Retail Tech Pathways for Opportunity Youth

Insights + Foundations for a Future-Ready Framework

DESIGN INSIGHTS *an Education Design Lab publication series*

Executive Summary

This Design Insights Brief highlights insights from a **design session with Opportunity Youth in partnership with Big Thought**, a Dallas-based nonprofit dedicated to closing the opportunity gap through creativity and learning. The session surfaced lived experiences and aspirations that challenge the myth of linear career pathways and call for systems that adapt to youth—not the other way around.

Opportunity Youth are part of the broader population of **New Majority Learner-Earners (NMLs)**—the 62% of Americans for whom college was not designed. Like so many NMLs, these young people need more flexible, affordable pathways that connect their talents to family-sustaining careers.

> **New Majority Learner-Earners**
>
> The people for whom college was not designed, which includes the 62% of Americans who don't hold a four-year degree. They need more flexible, affordable pathways that lead to family-sustaining careers.
> Learn More

To situate these insights in the broader landscape, the Lab also drew on research from **JFF, Burning Glass Institute, and FSG**. Together, these perspectives underscore both the urgency and the opportunity to reimagine retail as a launchpad into tech and tech-adjacent roles for Opportunity Youth and other New Majority Learners.

Three key takeaways frame this work:

1. Co-Design and Ecosystem Alignment Are Essential
Opportunity Youth must be treated as co-creators, not just participants. Our design session with Big Thought centered the youth voice, while partner insights reinforced that no single actor can carry pathways alone. A coordinated ecosystem—employers, education providers, community organizations, and youth together—creates the conditions for growth, belonging, and mobility.

2. From Career-Ready to Future-Ready
Retail pathways must prepare youth not just for today's jobs but for a future defined by flux, technology, and uncertainty—emphasizing durable skills, flexibility, and agency to navigate a shifting economy.

3. Pathways Must Reflect Lived Experiences—And That Requires Mindset Shifts
Traditional models imagine a neat, linear progression from school to work. In reality, Opportunity Youth—like many NMLs—move through non-linear journeys shaped by barriers, pivots, and opportunities. Designing effectively means adapting systems to lived experience and shifting institutional mindsets away from deficit views toward recognition of youth resilience and creativity.

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By leveraging the retail industry as a foundational platform, the Lab proposes creating robust career pathways that emphasize three interconnected elements: Skill Acquisition, Holistic Growth, and Long-term Career Mobility. Together, these elements ensure youth not only gain relevant and transferable skills, but also develop the confidence, adaptability, and sense of belonging needed to thrive in uncertain futures while advancing within and beyond retail.

This brief offers a roadmap for building retail pathways that honor youth journeys, expand real choices, and equip them to thrive in a rapidly changing future of work.

Retail tech roles offer **strong** economic opportunity

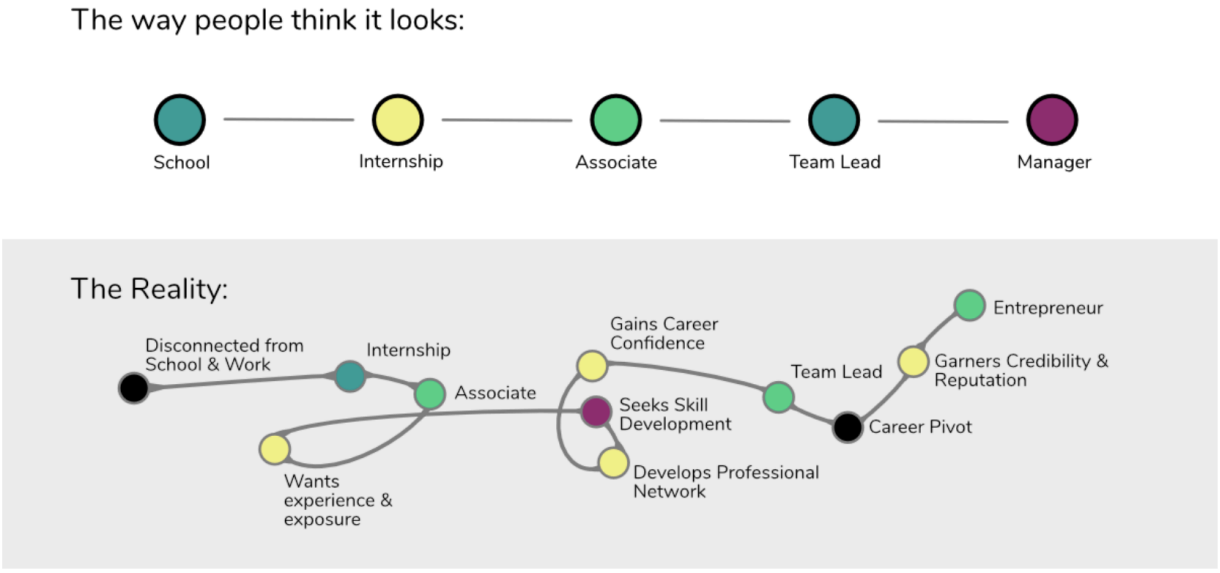
Computer Support Specialist	**Computer Network Architect**	**Welder**	**Logistician**
$59,240	$129,840	$48,940	$79,400
13% growth	33% growth	2% growth	19% growth

https://www.fsg.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Retails-Tech-Transformation_Upskilling-Frontline-Employees-for-Next-Gen-Careers_August-2025_VF.pdf

Beyond the Myth: What Pathways Really Look Like

Pathways are often imagined as linear: school → internship → associate → team lead → manager. In reality, OY journeys are non-linear, with lateral moves, pauses, pivots, and skill-building moments happening alongside life events.

This distinction is more than cosmetic — it has deep implications for how we design. Our systems must adapt to youth, not the other way around. Pathways must be flexible, inclusive, and supportive of the ways young people actually navigate work and learning.



Career Ready vs. Future Ready

As scholar S. Craig Watkins observes:

> ***Career ready*** *implies preparing students for a world in which work is stable, linear, and secure.*
> ***Future ready*** *implies preparing students for a world in which work is in flux, non-linear, and insecure.*
>
> **S. Craig Watkins**

Career-ready pathways emerged in a time when most workers could expect stable employment, steady promotions, and predictable skill demands. They reflect long-term stability, linear advancement, and reliance on established structures. They tend to:	**Future-ready** pathways acknowledge that work is now shaped by automation, digital transformation, and global shifts. They emphasize adaptability, continuous learning, and the ability to navigate uncertainty. They must:
Focus on industry-specific technical skills for current job openings.	Blend technical and durable skills — adaptability, problem-solving, digital fluency, collaboration.
Prioritize credentials as proof of readiness.	Prepare learners for ongoing reskilling throughout their career.
Assume roles and industries will remain relatively static.	Enable movement across sectors and roles, not just within a single industry.
Define success as initial job placement in a targeted occupation.	Define success as long-term career mobility, resilience, and the ability to navigate change.

For OY, the difference is critical. A career-ready pathway might train a young person for today's high-demand retail tech role — but if that role is automated or restructured, they risk losing stability. A future-ready pathway ensures that same young person leaves with transferable skills, self-direction, and the supports to pivot into new roles as opportunities change.

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Future-Ready Imperatives

To meet the demands of a shifting labor market, retail tech pathways must:

- Anticipate and adapt to **constant technological disruption**.
- Recognize **existing skills and lived experiences** as valuable assets.
- Use **inclusive design practices** to dismantle systemic barriers.
- Prioritize **proof through performance** — portfolios, projects, and employer endorsements over credentials alone.

Data Insight Foundational Steps for Employers

Preparing a workforce that can meet both current and future demands requires thoughtful planning across multiple levels — from identifying promising roles and defining pathways to addressing barriers at the individual, company, and ecosystem levels. According to the Burning Glass Institute and FSG, employers can take three foundational steps to set this work up for long-term success:

Pilot place-based pathways that align training with local labor market needs and available roles.	**Leverage internal assets** including workforce data, managers, and communication channels — to support and promote the pathway internally.	**Articulate a clear business case** that connects talent development to measurable outcomes like increased retention, internal mobility, or productivity.

Piloting in a specific geographic location offers a practical starting point for employers seeking to advance associates into high-opportunity tech roles. A place-based approach allows for the consideration of barriers like geographic mismatch, focuses interventions where they are needed most, and provides early evidence of impact to refine and scale successful strategies.

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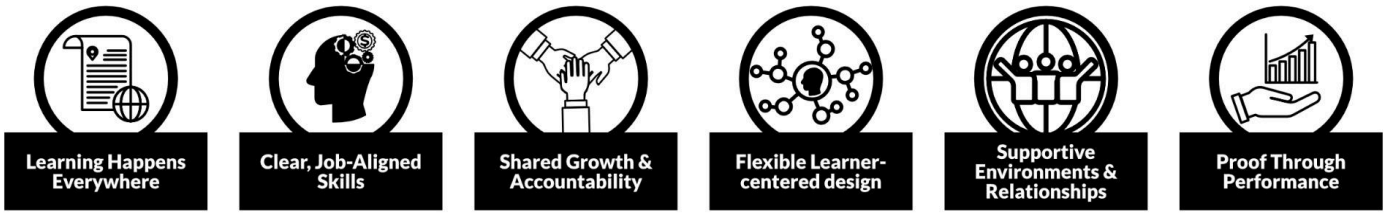
Our Design Approach

The Lab's work begins by identifying a critical problem and collaborating with the people closest to that problem. By doing this, we work with partner communities to change processes, change lived experiences, change how we do things, and change systems to be more equitable.

Transformation begins with how we enter the work, whose voices we prioritize, and how we share power in decision-making. If we are to redesign learn-and-work systems for OY, we must start by **centering those who have been excluded** — and ensuring that the supports they identify as essential are designed in from the start.

Design Insights: What Makes an Opportunity Youth Focused Pathway Work

Our prototype is anchored in design principles emerging from interviews with youth, community leaders, and employers. These principles include skills, but place equal — and sometimes greater — weight on **supports** that sustain long-term engagement and success:



Learning Context
Recognition that learning happens anywhere: bootcamps, on-the-job training, and informal learning.

Skills Clarity
Job-aligned, plain-language, performance-based skills.

Accountability
Shared responsibility across youth, providers, and employers.

> "It's important that an organization functions in a way that builds a community and culture around addressing the issues opportunity youth face, and align on how trainers handle them so those young people don't have to relive hurdles they've already overcome with other trainers."

Flexibility
Non-linear entry points, re-entry, and rerouting options.

Support Systems
Mentorship, transportation, childcare, mental health resources, and other wraparound supports that make participation possible.

Performance Proof
Portfolios, projects, and real-time feedback as evidence of readiness.

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A Model for Future-Ready Pathways

Drawing from the Lab's work and market analysis, effective retail tech pathways are:

- **Co-designed with youth** to ensure relevance and authenticity.
- **Structured so learning can happen everywhere,** and must provide opportunities to pull from various experiences.
- **Backed by transparent, culturally competent mentorship** that is consistent over time.
- **Flexible in structure** to allow re-entry, rerouting, and rapid skill updates.
- **Linked to advancement**, leading from frontline tech-enabled roles to tech-adjacent and higher-skill positions.

The Lab's Learner Engagement Framework — growth, belonging, and agency — underpins this model, ensuring pathways develop not only technical skills but also the confidence, credibility, and adaptability youth need to thrive.

Barriers to Overcome

Insights from the FSG + Burning Glass research point to three interconnected levels of barriers:

Ecosystem
Geographic mismatch between tech jobs and frontline workers.
No shared skills language across the sector.
Training misaligned with retail-specific needs.
Employer
Credential bias overlooks skilled workers without degrees
Lack of long-term workforce planning ties hiring to short-term cycles.
Unclear business case limits sustained investment.
Individual
Youth may not see themselves in tech roles despite digital fluency.
ROI on training is often unclear when upfront costs (tuition, childcare, transportation) are high.

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The Retail Tech Ecosystem

A thriving Retail Tech pathway ecosystem includes these key actors. When they share responsibility, pathways become more resilient and outcomes more equitable.

- **Opportunity Youth** as co-creators of their own development journeys.
- **Employers** as co-owners of training and advancement strategies, embedding skill-building into daily work.
- **Community-Based Organizations (CBOs**) as providers of wraparound supports that remove logistical and life barriers
- **Education Providers** to deliver targeted, flexible learning that complements on-the-job experience

Data Insight Cost of Turnover

Replacing a single frontline retail worker costs employers nearly **$10,000** when accounting for recruitment, onboarding, and lost productivity. Investing in internal mobility through retail tech pathways can reduce turnover and strengthen retention — delivering measurable ROI alongside social impact.

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Insights from the Retail Tech Convening

(Co-hosted with JFF, July 23, 2025)

On **July 23, 2025**, Education Design Lab and **Jobs for the Future (JFF)** co-hosted a Retail Tech Convening in Dallas, Texas. The event brought together leaders from education, workforce, philanthropy, community-based organizations, and industry — including **All Stars Project of Dallas, Asset Funders Network, Best Buy, Big Thought, Burning Glass Institute, Code the Dream, CVS Health, Dallas College, Digital Promise, Educate Texas, the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, FSG, NPower, Per Scholas, United Way of Metropolitan Dallas, Walmart/Walmart.org, Workforce Solutions Greater Dallas, and Year Up United/Grads of Life**.

At the convening, participants engaged with the realities that Opportunity Youth face in navigating non-linear career journeys. They interrogated the persistent **myth of linear pathways** and worked to reimagine what it looks like when systems adapt to youth — rather than expecting youth to adapt to systems.

The dialogue also emphasized the need to move from preparing young people to be **career-ready** to helping them become **future-ready**—equipped with durable skills, flexibility, and agency to thrive in uncertain, tech-driven economies.

Finally, participants reinforced that **pathway design requires both co-design and ecosystem alignment**. Opportunity Youth must be engaged as co-creators, and employers, educators, and community partners must share responsibility. No single actor can carry pathways alone; it takes a coordinated, cross-sector ecosystem to deliver scale-ready, inclusive pathways that create real mobility.

#1

Youth-Centered, Employer-Responsive Pathways

- Treat youth as subject matter experts, not just participants.
- Integrate transferable skills, continuous learning, and mentorship.
- Pair high expectations with high support to address barriers.

Practice Spotlight "Seven Days of My Story" Activity

During the convening, participants stepped into the lived experiences of OY navigating a retail tech pathway. Each "day" represented a different challenge — from balancing competing priorities to adapting to new technology. Emotions ranged from hope 🙂 to frustration 😖 and uncertainty 😕. The most-cited supports included navigation 🧭, clear communication 💬, access to tools 🛠️, empathy ❤️‍🔥, and awareness-building 👁️. This shared vocabulary now informs our design approach and reinforces the need for pathways that address both technical training and the human factors that shape success.

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Partner Perspective **Code the Dream**

Employers are a critical part of the retail tech ecosystem, and strong employer engagement ultimately drives better outcomes for frontline workers. Code the Dream (CTD), a national nonprofit, has extensive experience partnering with employers to train and place participants into technology roles. From this work, CTD has identified three key lessons for effectively engaging employers:

1. **Make the business case.** Companies benefit when they invest in frontline workers. Nonprofits can leverage data and a company's specific challenges to build a compelling, evidence-based case for partnership.
2. **Co-create with the end goal in mind.** Clarify what a "win" looks like for both the nonprofit and the employer to ensure mutually beneficial outcomes.
3. **Work in tandem from start to finish.** Sustained support — from training through placement and beyond — ensures initiatives are responsive, effective, and built for long-term success.

#2

Strengthening Employer Engagement

- Build the business case using metrics like turnover cost savings (~$10K per frontline worker).
- Address concerns with practical, evidence-based approaches.
- Engage HR, hiring managers, and social impact teams in co-design.

#3

Communication & Storytelling

- Write job descriptions and outreach that resonate with Gen Z.
- Elevate youth and employer success stories.
- Share local-level wins to encourage employer participation and investment

Observation Language as a Barrier and Bridge

Research shows that the words we use to describe roles shape whether young people see themselves in those jobs. Technical jargon can discourage otherwise qualified candidates, while plain, relatable language can expand interest. One example is the high-demand field of "mechatronics" — the integration of mechanical systems, electronics, and computing. Employers found that rebranding the role with accessible titles such as "Reliable Operations" or "Maintenance Engineering" significantly increased applicant interest, helping youth imagine themselves in roles that previously felt out of reach.

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Partner Perspective **Big Thought**

Community-based organizations (CBOs) are a vital part of the retail tech ecosystem. Big Thought, a national nonprofit focused on youth development and creative learning, has partnered with Education Design Lab to co-design retail tech pathways that center community voice. From this collaboration, three key lessons have emerged:

"Who is the person advocating on behalf of these students, who may not have been in positions to know how to navigate these conversations or to advocate for themselves?"

1. **Build trust as the foundation.** Youth are more likely to engage and persist when their first point of connection is a trusted CBO.
2. **Integrate holistic supports**. CBOs address barriers like transportation, childcare, and mentorship, enabling participants to fully engage in training and early employment.
3. **Act as ecosystem integrators**. By aligning employers, educators, and workforce organizations, CBOs ensure pathways remain grounded in the realities of youth while adapting to market needs.

This partnership-driven approach demonstrates that future-ready pathways are built not only on skill development but also on strong, future-ready communities.

#4

Ecosystem & Partnership Development

- Strengthen partnerships to deliver wraparound supports.
- Support local pilots and innovation studies, especially those involving CBOs.
- Provide training for employers and supervisors on effectively engaging OY.

#5

Mindset & Culture Change

Mindset and culture shifts are at the heart of building pathways that recognize OY as high potential. Participants in the convening emphasized empathy, patience, and relational approaches as essential to this work.

> "Everybody could use a little more time to understand each other."
>
> **Convening Participant**

- Shift perceptions from "at risk" to "high potential."
- Promote supervision and mentorship as core talent development tools.
- Embed empathy and human-centered design principles in hiring and training systems.

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Conclusion & Call-to-Action

Retail tech pathways are more than a response to today's job market — they are a strategy for equipping Opportunity Youth to shape the future of work.

The next steps:

Co-design with youth and align ecosystems
Treat Opportunity Youth as co-creators, not just participants. Build coordinated efforts across employers, educators, and community partners.

Prepare for a future-ready economy
Equip youth with durable skills, flexibility, and agency to thrive in tech-driven, uncertain environments..

Design for lived experiences, not myths
Design for lived experiences, not myths

The moment is now: **pilot place-based pathways, leverage corporate assets, and build sector-wide skill recognition** to transform isolated success stories into **systemic change**.

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Walmart.org represents the philanthropic efforts of Walmart and the Walmart Foundation. By focusing where the business has unique strengths, Walmart.org works to tackle key social and environmental issues and collaborate with others to spark long-lasting systemic change. Walmart has stores in 19 countries, employs more than 2.1 million associates and does business with thousands of suppliers who, in turn, employ millions of people. Walmart.org is helping people live better by supporting programs to accelerate upward job mobility for frontline workers, address hunger, build inclusive economic opportunity for people in supply chains, protect and restore nature, reduce waste and emissions, and build strong communities where Walmart operates. To learn more, visit www.walmart.org or connect on Twitter @Walmartorg.

We are also grateful to our research partners at **JFF, Burning Glass Institute, and FSG**, whose analysis and insights informed this brief. Special thanks to **Big Thought** and the young people who served as our co-designers, ensuring that Opportunity Youth perspectives were central to this work.

We thank the many organizational representatives who contributed their expertise through consultations, including **Code the Dream, Digital Promise, Best Buy, Walmart, the Responsible Business Initiative for Justice (RBIJ), and Dallas College**.

Finally, we acknowledge the participants in the **Retail Tech Convening (July 23, 2025, Dallas)**, whose dialogue and collaboration added essential field-wide perspective.

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Dallas Innovation Alliance	Dallas Regional Chamber	Digital Promise / Digital Promise Global
Educate Texas	Education Design Lab	Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas
FleurishEd Consulting	Forest Forward	Fossil Group
FSG	Jobs for the Future (JFF)	Modern Citizen
Nomi Network	NPower	Per Scholas
Responsible Business Initiative for Justice (RBIJ)	SurveyMonkey	Taco Bell Foundation
United Way of Metropolitan Dallas	Walmart / Walmart.org	Workforce Solutions Greater Dallas
	Year Up United / Year Up United – Grads of Life	

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Author Bio

This publication was authored by **Brian Rubin, Senior Education Designer at Education Design Lab**. Brian leads the design of education pathways that connect Opportunity Youth and justice-impacted individuals to careers aligned with the future of work. His work emphasizes skills-based hiring, economic mobility for New Majority Learner-Earners, and cross-sector partnerships with employers, educators, and community organizations.

How we used AI

AI was used to review and organize content from project documents, meeting transcripts, and stakeholder feedback to identify key themes and relevant quotes (ChatGPT). AI also assisted with editing and clarity improvements for select passages. All strategic recommendations, use cases, and core findings emerged directly from human-centered workshops, stakeholder interviews, and expert analysis — not from AI generation. All AI use has been reviewed to ensure alignment with Education Design Lab's commitment to human-centered design, responsible innovation, and standards for accuracy, equity, and ethical practice in workforce and education contexts.

ABOUT EDUCATION DESIGN LAB

Education Design Lab (the Lab) is a national nonprofit and intermediary with a mission to co-design an inclusive, skills-based learn+work system that facilitates upward economic mobility and closes opportunity gaps for the New Majority Learner-Earner. Our facilitated design process helps employer and education stakeholder groups co-design and launch scalable, skills-based education-to-work pathways that align talent supply and demand.

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